

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

Vol. 42 No. 2

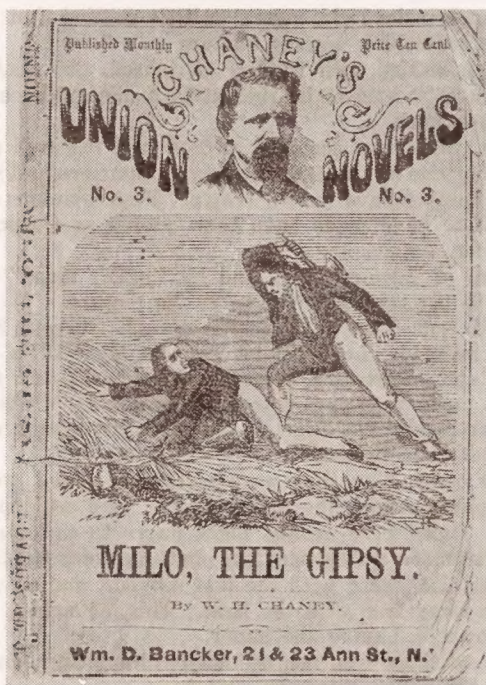
February 15, 1973

Whole No. 482

James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Pecket Prest

Two writers of Gothic "Bloods"

By W. O. G. Lofts



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 157

CHANEY'S UNION NOVELS

Publisher: Chaney & Williams, 45 Ann St., New York, N. Y. (as shown on title page of No. 3, only issue examined), Wm. D. Bancker is shown on cover. Issues: 4 (highest number seen advertised). Dates: Feb. to May 1866. Schedule of Issue: monthly. Size: 6x4¼". Pages: 100. Price: 10c. Illustrations: Pictorial cover in one color. No. 4 was a yellowish orange. Contents: No. 1 Enola; or, The Rescue. No. 2 Georgia St. Clair, A sequel to "Enola." No. 3 Milo the Gypsy; or, The Fatal Oath. No. 4 Luella; or, The Magic Kiss.

James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Pecket Prest

Two writers of Gothic "Bloods"

By W. O. G. Lofts

With the publication in two volumes in paperback format of "VARNEY THE VAMPIRE, or The Feast of Blood" by Dover Publications of New York, collectors of Gothic novels can now obtain copies of easily the most famous and most sought after of all the Edward Lloyd "penny bloods."

Such was the reverence held for this monumental work in England, that I can well remember, about 20 years ago, the large number of then elderly Victorian fiction collectors discussing it almost in terms of awe. I can also well recall the intense excitement I felt when I discovered the first 59 penny numbers in an old book shop, costing only a few pence each. After fruitless hours spent in trying to trace the remainder of the story to complete the volume, I eventually parted with what I had, for something rather more complete.

As E. F. Bleiler so correctly states in his Introduction to the Dover edition: "It is embarrassing to write an introduction to a book that is universally known as a landmark in its field, yet is so little studied that its authorship is disputable, and its publishing history obscure . . ."

I can quite sympathize with Bleiler, as, indeed, the whole history of the Lloyds' "penny bloods" seems to be riddled with misleading statements, incorrect data, pure guesswork.

For one thing, there was certainly not enough research done in the field by such noted authorities as the Rev. Montague Summers and George Augustus Sala, who really ought to have known better. Their opinions and the findings they were thought to have made have been quoted as Gospel by students in the field ever since.

A brief history of Edward Lloyd and his "penny blood" empire would be in order, I think, to put the reader right in the picture.

Edward Lloyd was born at Thornton Heath, Surrey, England in 1815. After his parents moved to London, and when he was still a boy, he opened a shop in Curtain Road, Shoreditch, where he sold books and newspapers. His first venture as a publisher appears to have been Lloyd's *Stenographer*, a paper devoted to shorthand. Although he had the introduction printed, he wrote the symbols himself, in longhand.

Later, "penny bloods," as they were scathingly called, were his specialty. These were very popular with the lower classes, who could not afford to buy a complete book. There were usually eight pages to each penny number, except for the last number which had less—but, as compensation, a title-page, preface, and frontispiece went with the last number, and as a rule the second number was given away free with the first. This, of course, ensured that the purchaser would keep on buying the paper.

Newsagents, and those who ran the cheap circulating libraries, would buy up a quantity of the penny numbers, and have them bound into volumes of

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from 15 to 20 numbers each.

With the exception of about a score of titles, which were issued in a larger size (9¾ by 6¼"), all of Lloyd's "bloods" were printed in uniform octavo—the earlier titles in single column and the later in double column. Several of the earlier stories were re-issued later, in fewer parts but with a few additional illustrations.

Lloyd first issued his "bloods" from Wych Street, just off the Strand—then, after several moves, finally settled at 12 Salisbury Square, Fleet Street. This, in fact, was where the bulk of his stories were published.

Many of Lloyd's "bloods" first appeared as serials in his numerous weekly and monthly papers. The stories were of three main types: historical romances; Gothic horror tales (such as "Varney the Vampire"); and domestic romances. For the latter, due to an extensive female following, Lloyd eliminated highwaymen and vampires, stuck on an innocuous title, and confined himself to the milder themes of rape and murder, and seduction and abduction. Blood, however, was a factor common to all the Lloyd stories.

At one point, he flagrantly pirated the works of Charles Dickens, then at the start of his career—and other famous authors of the time were similarly ill-treated.

Between 1836 and 1856, he published upwards of 200 stories of varying lengths, including historical tales of the type popularized by W. Harrison Ainsworth. His principal writers were Thomas Pecket Prest and James Malcolm Rymer.

Most of the stories were, of course, anonymous—but even at the time confusion as to the authorship of certain books appeared to exist, for both Prest and Rymer were at different times credited with the same stories. However, this can be explained by the fact that publishers often put "By the author of . . ." (mentioning a successful title by someone else) to a new work, thus ensuring good sales for the story.

Later, Lloyd founded Lloyd's Sunday News, and after buying up several newspapers became tremendously wealthy. However, so ashamed was he of his early publishing ventures, and the origin of his fortune, that he used to send agents round to the old coffee shops and cheap circulating libraries to buy their stocks of his penny publications, in order to pulp them at his paper mills.

This is the main reason why so few of his original "bloods" exist today. It didn't matter to Lloyd, in any case. He died on April 8th, 1890—a millionaire.

Most of the information on the history of Lloyd's publishing ventures has been gleaned from biographies written by his former writers, editors, and even an artist. However, this was scanty information, to say the least.

According to Thomas Catling, who wrote for Lloyd as well as editing some of his papers: "They (the writers) were paid ten shillings for a weekly serial instalment, with ideas for stories submitted something like eight weeks in advance." Catling mentions Rymer as having written half the "bloods," but curiously makes no mention of Prest.

Thomas Frost, another writer (but a minor one, at a later period), mentions Prest but not Rymer. George Augustus Sala, who for a time made the drawings for the woodcuts used in the Lloyd publications, says about Rymer:

"One source of his income as a freelance was due to his reporting the details of the latest murder, and he prospered during the famous Manning Case. He blossomed into brand new coat of Newmarket cut, new pantaloons; a glossy silk hat shone upon his head, Wellington boots adorned his lower extremities, and the bows of a satin necktie floated on his chest. The only thing he

lacked was a waist-coat—but, alas, the Mannings were hanged ere “Ada the Betrayed” had secured that much-coveted vest, and afterwards, murders being rare, he drifted gradually back into his old and normal conditions of seediness.”

Sala also stated that the author's real name was Malcolm J. Merry, and that he used the pseudonyms “Malcolm J. Errym” and “Rymer” when writing “bloods,” as his own name was too jovial. It can easily be seen that “Errym” and “Rymer” are anagrams of Merry, and, at first, this seemed a feasible explanation.

The fourth main source of information concerning Gothic “bloods” was the famous Rev. Montague Summers, who, of course, had no connection with the Lloyd firm but was recognized as an authority in this particular field, as well as that of witchcraft and demonology.

Unfortunately, his mammoth work “A Gothic Bibliography” contained many errors. Most of these could have been avoided, if only Summers had taken the trouble to check his information. On the other hand, he was deliberately misinformed on many items.

A word of explanation is needed here, I think. Prior to the Second World War, there was intense rivalry between collectors of “bloods.” Barry Ono, for instance (a well-known Music Hall performer and self-styled “King of the Bloods,” because of his vast collection of rare material) used to impress people by telling them of all the books of which only he had copies. This was mainly because these same books were figments of his fertile imagination.

He also had a tendency to alter titles and sub-titles in his records which he thought were not sufficiently gory. Some of these concocted titles include: “The Morgue-Keeper's Daughter,” “Varney the Vulture, or The Footsteps of the Doomed,” “The Vampire's Dream, or Ten Different Ways to the Scaffold,” and “The Skeleton Clutch, or The Goblet of Gore.”

There is no doubt that some wonderfully blood-curdling tales could have been woven around such titles, but it does make the researcher's task a little hard to come across them. Thus, the work of someone like Summers, who was going on data he had procured at second-hand, from collectors who in some cases were making up their own titles, cannot be regarded as the last word in accuracy.

Summers mentions “Rymer,” or “Merry” in his “Gothic Bibliography,” but makes no comment except that he was “most prolific.” He does, however, give much more on Prest.

“Thomas Peckett Prest: 1810-1879, was related to Edward Prest, Archdeacon of Durham. Prepared his sermons for the printer. Commenced his career by adapting farces and melodramas from the French, etc. Was a talented musician, and writer of songs. Contributed to *The Hornet*, etc. His favorite house of call was for many years ‘The White Swan’ in Salisbury Court, Fleet Street. Prest died in an infirmary near London with a lung complaint, 1878/9.”

Now whilst over the years I have done extensive research into juvenile literature and writers, it was only recently that I decided to do my own investigations into the Gothic field, and especially Prest and Rymer. Apart from anything else, I hardly dared question the statements made by such authorities in the field as Summers and Sala (especially Sala—who, after all, did work for Lloyd, and presumably had first-hand knowledge). However, I decided in the end to have a crack at the subject, and found, to my astonishment, that I was assembling some startling new facts on the matter.

Research into the lives of both Rymer and Prest was, to say the least, extremely difficult to carry out. Both were born many years before the official records were begun at Somerset House (1837). For a start, I spent over

a month searching through over 50 years of records for a "Malcolm J. Merry" (which Sala alleged was the author's correct name), only to find that he didn't exist. I also traced living descendants of a Thomas Prest, only to find that I had been working on the wrong person.

Firstly let us deal with the former writer, about whom the greatest amount of data has been uncovered. James Malcolm Rymer (to give him his correct name) was the son of Malcolm Rymer, a gentleman of independent means, and was born in 1814. Unfortunately his actual place of birth and early life are, at the time of writing, still obscure. But in the 1850s there was published an anonymous autobiography entitled "The Unspeakable, or The Life and Adventures of a Stammerer" (Clarke & Beeton, 1855). This was claimed by the author to be strictly true, though the real names of people were not given and the writer did say that all the incidents in the book didn't actually happen to one person.

This book was such a success (and so well was it received by the Press and reviewers of the time) that a second edition was printed by Charles H. Clarke in 1856. However, from our point of view, easily the most important thing about this publication is that, according to the British Museum, the author was James Malcolm Rymer!

This, of course, should be viewed somewhat cautiously, as even if Rymer was the author, he could have been ghosting it for someone else, and, in any case, the British Museum have been known to be wrong. Certainly some of the "facts" in the book do tie up with the real-life Rymer, especially his background, though no mention is made in it of his writing career, and the dates in it all seem to be about ten years out.

Very briefly, the narrator says that he was born in a large mansion not far from the home of William Shakespeare, at Stratford-on-Avon. His father, a mild, kind type with a "fluttery" manner, belonged to the younger branch of a noble family. His brother was Lord "Deciduis" (a *nom-de-litteraire*), who was, to say the least, cool towards him, and had no real contact. Rymer's mother died when he was only one year old, and he lived quite happily with his sister, who was three years older and to whom he was devoted.

All went well, until, when he was three years old, his father brought home a large, stately lady, who was introduced as his new Mama. Rymer took an instant dislike to her—especially as she obviously had his father completely under her thumb. Then came another shock, greater than the first, when his sister died of a lung hemorrhage.

These emotional upsets caused him to stammer, and things were not improved when he was packed off to school. Events then took a decidedly fictional turn—the death of his father . . . a conspiracy by his step-mother . . . a crooked lawyer . . . a lost will. He had a University education, and was discharged from the Army because of his speech impediment. Eventually, he was cured by a famous specialist—James Hunt, M.M.S.I. (this, incidentally, was a real person). Then, coming into some money left by an Uncle, he married the love of his life—and presumably lived happily ever after. So much for "The Unspeakable."

Whether this was in fact a fictionalized account of Rymer's early life, we cannot of course be sure. What happens next IS fact, however—for in 1833, when he was 25, he married Caroline Cuttly, a minor (under the age of 21), and a girl far below his own station in life. She was the daughter of a shoe-maker living in Red Lion Street, London.

Rymer was then described as a civil engineer. By 1842, however, he had obviously entered journalism, as he was editing the highbrow *Queen's Magazine* (with his name—James Malcolm Rymer, Esq.—in large letters on the mast-

head), a monthly miscellany of literature and the Arts. It was in these pages that one of his serials, "Jane Shore, or London in the Reign of Edward IV," was published, by-lined as "by the Editor."

A very successful writing career followed, and when he died—on August 11, 1884, at Lawn Cottage, Shepherds Bush Green, Middlesex (now London)—he left a small fortune, and was described as "a Gentleman." His second wife, Sarah Rebecca Rymer, outlived him by 25 years, dying in 1909 aged 85.

Incidentally, Rymer had a son by his first marriage, Walter Wellesley, who was living at 24 Rue de la Charme, Brussels, Belgium. Interestingly enough, this place is mentioned in "The Unspeakable," and we are told that the narrator spent some time there.

Certainly, on the evidence shown, Rymer—far from being "seedy" (as described by Sala) was well-educated, shrewd, and a man of high intelligence. He died a very respectable and prosperous Victorian gentleman.

Now we come to Prest, who, according to Summers, died in the 1878/79 period not far from London. I soon discovered that a Thomas Prest had in fact died in Epping (which is not far from London) in 1877, aged 67, which did tie up with his date of birth, 1810—and I wasn't unduly worried by the lack of a second name, "Peckett." Writers have a habit of tagging additional names to their own to give them more importance.

But, as I said, to my dismay I discovered that this could not have been the right Prest. This one had been running a watch-making business, going back several generations.

Eventually, I found our author—but, to my astonishment, I discovered that he had died not in 1878/79, but some 20 years earlier, on 5th June, 1859. Moreover, far from dying in an infirmary, he had died in his own bed, at 9 George Street, Thornhill Bridge, Islington, Middlesex (now North London), Described correctly as an author, he died aged only 49 of phlebitis, a most painful inflammation of the veins.

His second name, incidentally, was spelt "Pecket," with one "t. This name is more commonly found as a surname, but with two "t"s; it seems to have originated in Cambridgeshire around the time of William the Conqueror.

George Street was a lower class area which teemed with painters, sculptors and writers, and its population was continually on the move. Consequently, it has been extremely difficult to pin our author down at one particular place when, for instance, a census was taken.

What is certain is that he died penniless. It is also likely that he was married—but at the time of writing, investigations are still continuing. Some years ago, the Prest family of New York compiled a complete family tree of all the Prests that they could find, but our author is not on it.

Doubt must also be cast of course on Summers' claim (in his "Gothic Bibliography") that Prest was related to the Venerable Edward Prest, Clerk Archdeacon of Durham and rector of Ryton. This reverend gentleman was not born until 1824 and did not start writing his sermons until 1861, some two years after our author's death. It is difficult to see how T. P. Prest could have prepared his sermons for the printer.

Prest's first venture into editorship probably took place on 5th November, 1835—when he put out *The Magazine of Curiosity and Wonder*. This was described as "a Miscellany of Surprising, Remarkable, and Astonishing facts, collected from the most Authentic Sources." It was published by G. Drake of Clare Market, and ran for 29-issues. Each week, the paper contained short stories on all the strange people, freaks, and eccentric characters of the day.

Proof at least that he was a song-writer is shown by the fact that his name was given as the editor of *The London Singers' Magazine and Reciters' Album*

in 1838. His name actually appeared for the first time in issue No. 13, where some of his songs were published. Curiously enough, a little later the name was dropped and with No. 32 the inscription appeared: "Originally edited by Mr. T. Prest." The paper only lasted a few more issues.

According to old-timers who claimed to have known Prest, he was something of a drunkard, unstable, unreliable, and always on the move to avoid his creditors. Some of the factual evidence seems to bear this out, though without more authentic information we may be doing him an injustice. Arthur W. Larson (now long passed on) who knew Sala in his younger days, once told me that Prest was a "morbid genius," and was regarded by many at the time as something of a second Edgar Allan Poe.

It was Lawson, in fact, who said that "Varney the Vampyre" was written by Prest—"That's his work, all right!"—and this information has been accepted by most authorities ever since. E. F. Bleiler, however, who has made a close study of the styles of both Prest and Rymer, makes out an excellent case for Rymer in his Introduction to the new Dover edition.

However, most of the collectors I have met, in my early days, who read the "bloods" avidly claimed that it was without question T. P. Prest. Summers especially seemed to lean over backwards to credit anything doubtful to Prest. Another well-known authority—John Medcraft—who published a booklet on the Edward Lloyd publications, claimed that he knew it was Prest, but unfortunately never disclosed the source of his information.

Althous I have perused thousands of early Victorian papers and magazines, I have yet to see any mention of the Lloyd "bloods," especially any item relating to their authorship. No one seemed to care—perhaps quite rightly. After all, the stories were generally regarded as scurrilous matter, and the writers obscure hacks. Not even Lloyd ever thought it was Great Literature.

Only a short while ago, I paid a visit to a mid-Victorian villa at Shepherd's Bush Green, now a bustling part of West London. Mrs. Sarah Rymer was actually living there up to 1909 . . . the name of the house then called "Errym Lodge."

Only a street away, there used to live a well-known collector of "bloods," whom I used to visit regularly. He used to boast to me of how he had been collecting since 1900, and often proudly showed me his own copy of "Varney the Vampyre."

What a tremendous pity that he and others of his ilk did not do any constructive research at the time. A few minutes' walk might have cleared up a lot of the mystery that must remain with us, probably for all time, regarding Edward Lloyd's "bloods"—and especially the most famous of them all . . . "Varney the Vampyre."

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A DIME NOVEL COLLECTOR'S BOOK SHELF

A COMPREHENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF C. A. STEPHENS, by Louise Harris. Published by C. A. Stephens Collection, Brown University, Box 1926, Providence, RI 02912. An excellent bibliography of the works of C. A. Stephens whose works the author insists were not boys' books. A short biographical sketch is also included. The book was published in 1965 but has only recently been brought to my attention. The price is \$3.50.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS

HORATIO ALGER'S PAYING THE HIGH PRICE OF SUCCESS, by Mark Finston. Sunday Star-Ledger, Oct. 29, 1972. Discusses the meeting of the Annual Horatio Alger Awards. These are the award ceremonies headed by Cecil Earle Baker and Norman Vincent Peale. Apparently a noted historian Dr. Richard M. Huber has uncovered old church records which indicate that Alger was a homosexual. This maligning of a major contributor to the American Dream is shocking, indeed.

BUTTERNUT HARVEST, by Hal Borland. Yankee Magazine, November 1972. A nostalgic article about C. A. Stephens and his stories in Youth's Companion.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir:

I wonder if among your circle of old boys book collectors, there are any interested in the old prewar papers such as the Union Jack or Sexton Blake Library. I have some mint condition Buffalo Bill's put out by Aldine in 1922 and am looking for a suitable swap. If you know of anyone interested, I wonder if you would be so kind as to advise me of the address so I can pursue any inquiries further

and perhaps bring pleasure and satisfaction to two fellow collectors. Trusting you can find time to write and advise me. I am also interested in Boys Friend Library containing Sexton Blake stories.

Your Sincerely,
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Dear Ed:

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